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ABSTRACT

This paper is about operationalizing three of fourteen theoretical propositions related to ability and self-beliefs set forth by Donald Super (1990). The three propositions are (1) people differ in their abilities, personalities, needs, values, self-concepts, and interests; (2) developing through the life stages can be guided by facilitating the maturing of abilities and interests and by aiding in reality testing; and (3) each occupation requires a characteristic pattern of abilities and personality traits. The paper describes Ability Explorer (AE), the instrument to operationalize these propositions. The AE is an instrument designed to help individuals complete a self-exploration of their abilities and relate this information to career or educational planning. The article explains how AE determines career groups of jobs related to a person's highest two abilities. It concludes that while Super's propositions are well known and objective measures of ability have long existed, it is important not to forget that abilities and self-concept beliefs are reciprocal. (JDM)

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# Operationalizing the Ability Chunk of Super's Vocational Theory

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This paper is about operationalizing three of 14 theoretical propositions related to ability and self-beliefs set forth by Donald Super (1990), a prominent vocational development theorist. Savickas (1994) wrote that "Ability is the integrative construct for much of the rest of psychology" (p. 238). How well we do things influences the way we think about ourselves. Being able to do something well is related to developing a feeling or belief of competence, which in turn provides a sense of self-esteem and potency.

The propositions are:

*People differ in their abilities and personalities, needs, values, interests, traits and self-concepts.*

*Development through the life stages can be guided partly by facilitating the maturing of abilities and interests and partly by aiding in reality testing and in the development of self-concepts.*

*Each occupation requires a characteristic pattern of abilities and personality traits--with tolerances wide enough to allow both some variety of occupations for each individual and some variety of individuals in each occupation.*

An instrument that operationalizes these three propositions is the *Ability Explorer* (AE) (Harrington & Harrington, 1996). If one wishes to see how people differ, as in the first proposition, a large number of options is helpful. The AE assesses the 14 major work-related abilities identified in the career development literature: language, numerical/mathematical, clerical, mechanical/technical, spatial, manual, scientific, interpersonal, leadership, musical/dramatic, organizational, persuasive, social, and artistic. Since 1975 Harrington and O'Shea have been using 14 abilities found in U.S. Department of Labor publications for use in career decision making. In a summary of 25 years of research, Prediger (1992) reported the same major skills, except that he identified literary rather than

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musical/dramatic ability. Self-report format methodology for assessing the multifaceted cognitive and non-cognitive abilities has been necessary because suitable tests are not available. In fact, current aptitude tests measure only six (43 percent) of the identified 14 abilities (Harrington & Harrington, 1996). Coincidentally, the use of many abilities rather than the typical 5 or 6 on current measures will better facilitate individuals presenting their uniqueness as part of Super's proposition.

The *Ability Explorer* is an instrument designed to help individuals complete a self-exploration of their abilities and relate this information to career and/or educational planning. It is a career counseling tool that will assist individuals as they discover and assess their potential and seek to understand the relationship of their abilities to school subject areas and to the world of work. There are 140 work and career-related ability statements and behavioral reinforcement statements, each designed to help individuals complete a self-exploration of their abilities in 14 of the work- and career-related abilities identified in the career development literature. Individuals indicate their ability level for each work-related statement on a 6-point scale ranging from "Very Good" to "Very Poor". The *Ability Explorer* also includes a self-report section dealing with activities a person may have tried and courses he or she may have taken.

The following example of AE results shows three scores for each ability area: a self-rating of ability score, a proficiency score in related activities, and the performance level in related school subjects plus the number of school subjects taken in that ability area. For example, scores visually show a person rated his or her scientific ability and involvement in scientific activities as high, rated course performance as medium, and had taken one science course. Interpretation would focus on the person verbalizing his or her self-beliefs about the relation of one's self-ratings to performance. Interpretation would continue to another ability where the self-rating was in the low range on numerical/mathematical with the math activity involvement and grade achievement at the mid range of all students in his or her grade (the AE is normed by grade) and where he or she had taken 3 math courses. The intent of the second example is to show that the person's self-esteem, in the case of math, is lower than expected based on objective data of average proficiency in activities and grades. Why? Self-beliefs or self-concept can and often do affect how one acts. This illustration of self-beliefs in relation to one's experiences and performance is related to Super's second proposition regarding reality testing and the development of self-concept. As one of America's premier authorities on psychological testing, Anastasi's statement (1992) has relevance here:

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> The relationship between personality and intellectual development is reciprocal. Not only do personality characteristics affect intellectual development, but intellectual level also affects personality development. The success an individual attains in the development and use of his or her aptitudes is bound to influence that person's emotional adjustment, interpersonal relations, and self-concept. In the self-concept, we can see most clearly the mutual influence of aptitudes and personality traits. The child's achievement in school, on the playground, and in other situations help to shape her or his self-concept; and this concept at any given stage influences his or her subsequent performance. In this respect, the self-concept operates as sort of private self-fulfilling prophecy (p. 613).

The *Ability Explorer* also reports career groups of jobs related to a person's highest two abilities. For example, careers suggested to a person whose two highest abilities were interpersonal and organization, who possessed good language and average numerical skills would be counselor, librarian, and teacher; business manager, funeral director, and sales manager; and legal investigator and paralegal. Clusters of related careers including varied jobs satisfy the third proposition Super set forth of people being qualified for groups of jobs rather than just a few.

A major benefit of using the three AE components - abilities, activities, and courses - is to convey that individuals can improve an ability if they previously neither had the experience nor the opportunity to develop the ability. Involvement in related activities and courses can help develop a specific ability. Exposure to the ten types of skills that comprise each ability also serves an educational function of better defining major competency areas related to work. Conveying that one can improve or enhance an ability is empowerment.

In conclusion, while Super's propositions are well known and objective measures of ability have long existed, our field may have forgotten in practice that abilities and self-concept beliefs are reciprocal. Effective practice calls for a multi-dimensional focus. Herr (1997) noted Super had a personal devotion to tools that could assess the individual's subjective self, that could reveal the person's uniqueness. "Objective measures identify a person's similarity to others, whereas subjective assessment reveals the person's uniqueness" (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996, pp. 138-9). Which assessment is more useful or predictive, what a person scores on a traditional test or a person's own self-assessment?

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